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Copper to Fiber Transition: What Consumers Need to Know

The Department of Telecommunications and Cable (DTC) issues the following advisory about the important transition from **traditional copper based landline telephone service to fiber optic based landline technologies**. Specifically, Verizon is replacing its traditional copper network in certain communities and migrating customers to a fiber network. Customers receiving landline phone service may be impacted by the transition and should be aware that some features and functionalities on the copper network may differ on the fiber network. You should also know that as a Verizon customer once migrated to fiber network, **the price you pay for your current calling plan for landline telephone service will remain the same**, until you decide to change it **AND landline telephone service delivered over a fiber network is not the same as Verizon's FiOS digital voice service**. Please read below for more information about the transition.

Q: What is happening to Verizon's telephone service?

A: Verizon is changing the equipment it uses to deliver traditional, landline telephone service to some homes and businesses in certain communities in Massachusetts. Specifically, in affected areas, Verizon intends to discontinue providing telephone service over the copper wires running from the street to each home, instead using fiber-optic cables. If Verizon does migrate your home or business to the fiber network, **the current price and plan you pay for landline telephone service will remain the same**.

Q: Why is Verizon making this change?

A: According to Verizon, fiber optic technology is more reliable than copper. Verizon also claims that it is no longer cost-effective to maintain separate fiber and copper-based networks. **The DTC requires that Verizon make available to all residential customers in Verizon's service territory a regulated landline voice telephone service** and Verizon claims its fiber service, where offered, will meet this obligation.

Q: If Verizon tells me that I must switch to fiber to continue to receive telephone service from Verizon, do I have to switch?

A: Yes, if you wish to remain a Verizon customer. Verizon is upgrading its network to fiber, which may impact your services in the future. This upgrade may require you to schedule an installation appointment with Verizon. **However, (1) Verizon remains obligated to provide landline telephone service to all customers who request such service, and (2) regardless of whether Verizon provides telephone service over copper or fiber network, the DTC will continue to monitor Verizon's performance to ensure compliance with all Massachusetts requirements concerning your consumer rights and protections, service quality, and public safety.**

Q: What is the most significant difference between copper-based telephone service and fiber-based telephone service?

A: The copper-based network is self-powered and will usually remain operational in the event of a power outage, while fiber service relies upon an optical network terminal (ONT), which must be connected to a power source or outlet at your home or business. If your power goes out, a backup battery connected to the ONT will provide you with backup power for a period of time. In the event of an electrical outage, most batteries will operate telephones up to 8 hours. **Please verify with Verizon the type of backup batteries available as well as replacement options.** The current calling plan and price you pay for your telephone service will not change when you switch to fiber based telephone service.

Q: Are there any other differences between copper and fiber-based telephone service I should be aware of?

A: Prior to switching to fiber-based service, you should inform Verizon if you have any home monitoring equipment such as alarm/security systems or medical equipment that relies upon your existing phone line to ensure that it will continue to work after you make the switch. In most cases, the equipment that you currently use to place and receive calls will continue to work on the fiber network. Also, there is no change to emergency calls to 911, provided that you have power to your home or, in the event of a power outage, have not exhausted the batteries in the ONT backup device described above. For additional information about power outages and telephone service, please visit <http://www.mass.gov/ocabr/docs/dtc/telecom/connected-emergencies-9-24-13.pdf>.

Q: I've heard about Verizon FiOS—is that the same as the fiber service that I may be migrated to?

A: No. *While the terms fiber and FiOS are used interchangeably at times, and both fiber-based traditional phone service and FiOS services are offered over Verizon's fiber-optic network, they are not the same.* If you upgrade your existing copper service to a fiber-optic based service **without changing your rate plan or calling features, your new service will continue to be subject to DTC regulation, and will come with certain consumer protections.** FiOS Digital Voice (FDV) is an unregulated service, and is an optional alternative to traditional telephone service to which the Department's consumer protection rules do not apply. Make sure you understand the difference before making any changes to your telephone service.

Q: What are the DTC's consumer protection rules?

A: The DTC's consumer protection rules include protection from termination for all residents certified as age 65 or older; payment plan arrangements for those behind on their bills; medical and personal emergency protection; and an allowance of 10 free directory assistance calls monthly.

A copy of the rules is provided at <http://www.mass.gov/ocabr/docs/dte/telecom/18448.pdf>. Contact the DTC hotline 1 800 392-6066 for info.

Q: How do I make sure that the consumer protection rules continue to apply to me when I switch to fiber-based telephone service?

A: If you wish to keep your existing consumer protections after the migration, be sure to clarify that you are getting a **regulated fiber telephone service product** and not an unregulated FiOS FDV voice product. **The current calling plan and price you pay for telephone service will not change when you switch to fiber based telephone service unless you decide to order a different service.**

Q: Are there any other differences between FiOS and a fiber-based regulated telephone service?

A: FiOS services are typically bundled with other products, and the voice component of the bundled service packages may be priced lower than traditional, regulated telephone service. Be aware of pricing, but understand that bundles which include FiOS Digital Voice are considered unregulated service. If you currently have DSL for High Speed Internet and want to remain a Verizon customer, Verizon will require you to purchase FiOS High Speed Internet service, as DSL is only available over the copper network or you may want to pursue other options for your HSI service. Additionally, FiOS Digital Voice does not allow third party calls or collect calls, which may impact your calling needs.

Q: Is there any other advice you can provide concerning the switch from copper to fiber telephone service?

A: Review your monthly bill after your telephone service has been migrated to fiber to ensure that the billing reflects the appropriate plan and price that you paid previously and no other changes have occurred without your permission. **Remember that fiber is not FiOS, these are not the same.** FiOS is a marketing term Verizon uses to brand its bundled services: Data High Speed Internet, video and/or Digital Voice. Fiber is a type of technology that Verizon has chosen to replace its copper network to deliver telephone service. There is no change to the current plan or price that you pay for migration to Verizon's fiber network.

If you need additional information or experience issues with your telephone service, please call or email the Department's Consumer Division at 1 800 392-6066 or consumer.complaints@state.ma.us. Additional information is available on the Department's website: <http://www.mass.gov/ocabr/government/oca-agencies/dtc-lp/> and also the Federal Communications Commission's website, <http://www.fcc.gov/blog/protecting-consumers-transition-copper-networks>.